**Words About The Word "Witch"**

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There are several definitions or connotations of the word "witch", and it is important to understand the differences in usage when one visits Salem and becomes acquainted with the Salem witch trials. The following is a very brief explanatory note outlining the three most common uses of the word.

First, to understand the Salem witch trials, it is necessary to know the 17th-century definition of witchcraft. In England and New England at that time, it was believed that a malefic witch had made a pact with the devil, the Christian embodiment of evil. The pact would involve an exchange of a soul for special evil powers with which other mortals could be tormented. Victims of witchcraft would claim to see horrible visions, experience physical pain and exhibit bizarre and troubling behavior. The supposed perpetrator, labeled a witch, would be subject to arrest, trial, conviction and sentence. In 17th-century New England, under the English legal system, a person convicted of witchcraft was hanged. The Court of Oyer and Terminer convicted persons accused of witchcraft under the precedent of previous executions in England and New England.

The word witch has another important definition. Practitioners of the religion of Witchcraft or Wicca trace their beliefs to pre-Christian times. Theirs is a nature-based religion which pays homage to a Father God and Mother Goddess. They recognize no personification of evil and disassociate themselves entirely from the 17th-century definition of witchcraft.

Finally, the word witch conjures up another image - the stereotypical crone with pointed black hat, wart on her nose, flying with her black cat or familiar on a broom. This cartoon interpretation of the word reaches far back into Western civilization and is reinforced by movies such as "The Wizard of Oz". Scary/comic witch and cat symbols are used throughout our culture, and the interpretation is particularly prevalent at Halloween.

Clearly, it is important to understand that the word "witch" is complex and powerful. Used as an accusation of Satanic pact in the 17th century, it could result in death. Used as a religious title, it indicates a follower of an ancient pagan belief system, and lastly, used in the popular interpretation of the word, it conveys a range of images from the humorous Broomhilda in the comics to the dangerous and frightening "wicked Witch of the West" in the movies. Each meaning of the word is distinct from the others and needs to be used in its proper context